

ALAN ROBB

Summary

Alan Robb, a district representative reminisces about work on the waterfront, being a part of the ILA union, and a career in politics. He also discusses the merging of the locals and the process leading up to the merger.

00:40

Born in Houston, 1960. Father moved in 1948 from New York. Started working with company on Houston waterfront. Merchant Marine. Transporting troops and civilians during the war. Twin brother worked in waterfront for three months. Used to visit Dad who was ship superintendent. Naturally went to work on the waterfront. Started in 1976, at 16 yrs. Started steam cleaning equipment in the steam room. Went to work full time at 18 yrs. Father proud, made career of it.

Partnership for progress. Started to ensure a partnership to survive and work together. Overcome conflicts. Father had incredible reputation for being honest. Made career in the ILA management. Started full time work in 1978. Worked at deep sea hold, loading and unloading ships. Good time to be there. Late 70s economy was good. Never missed a days work because work was always available.

12:00

Merging of the labor unions. Containerization was growing. Took maintenance job at one of the container depots as a welder. Business continued to grow. During the merger in mid 80s, had a regular job with overtime. There was black local and white local when started working. We worked side by side and everyone knew each other. One day black locals and white locals were merged together. There was opposition. Was in the middle of it. Was on executive board of local and made decisions that dealt with the merger. The problem came from the different qualifying criteria and not as much from the black and white issue. Trying to fix one criteria -- either hours or years -- to merge locals was the cause of the big rift. Many people were unhappy and left the waterfront. 1983 and there were still white and black local unions. Seemed to be a throwback to 20-30 years ago. Federal judge was involved. Local guys were given opportunity to sort out seniority system and work out details of mergers. But they were not able to do it and couldn't come up with a system. There were a lot of internal deals made. Been pro seniority always. Easy to appreciate seniority when there is a good work ethic. Seniority was a good program. Would get good benefits if you were senior. Seniority meant you were here the longest and would therefore get the breaks. Running a seniority based organization creates a few challenges. Times have changed and seniority is not respected the way it was. Brand new set of rules in place now.

25:45

Got involved in union activity very young, early on. Union guys were notorious if work was taken away from them. In the 70s 100% of business was with the ILA. When economy got tougher, people started to wonder about alternatives to the ILA. Was a

believer in the union system and was not going to allow the non union to come and take way of life. Meant a lot of late nights and counteraction and was not scared to fight. Believed in the cause. Non union interference seemed to be a disruption in way of life. Got involved in union politics through this channel. Politics came along with the movement. Was recognized since willing to do whatever was necessary. Ran for executive Board and became Chairman. 2 good friends who did not appreciate the merger even after a few years got into a fight with each other and one almost killed the other. After the fight, some old timers insisted on picking a side. Action was necessary. Was asked to pick sides and to not be friends with them. End of political career. Someone else got the endorsement. 15 years later, got back into politics. In 1990 started own company. Went into business. Put a container yard together. started moving containers in for a few years. Saw the employer side of the fence. Was able to understand the challenges that employers have. Gave an ability to empathize and understand from everyone's perspective.

42:15

Worked in that company for 4 years. Soon company changed business plan and moved business out of Houston. Went back to work on the waterfront. then worked half a year on waterfront and the other half went to work with a dotcom company. Stayed in Houston and did two projects and took some stock options. Went back to work on the waterfront in one of the warehouses. Mid 90s took a job at one of the warehouses as a Foreman and ran it for many years. At the warehouse, the president of the Local went AWOL. Went home one day and never came back. Was a little too overwhelmed and never came back No safeguards in place for something like that. Kept mailing checks to his house for a few years. Some members on the waterfront suggested I apply for the job. Still split up racially. Terrible relationship with employers. Politics was still black and white.

Ran against vice president in unexpired term. Year left and won the election and held position for a year in 2000. Opportunity for both VP and me to recognize if supported eh other. Vowed to support each other. Divided racially down the middle. Developed good relationships with employers. Picked up new business. Business started booming.

58.00

Difficult to make case to companies about non unions. Pros and cons to the ILA. Businesses that are cyclical, sometimes hard to keep some men on payroll if there is no work. ILA can get labor when needed with a phone call and send labor back to union office when done. Antiquated work rules that state labor must be paid even when they are not working or not productive. Goes against everything that we have been trying to push. Tough sales call, selling the ILA. Wages are not far off as work rules are. Want labor to make good living. Makes selling product tough. Appreciate that everyone has retirement benefits and are not burden to community.

1:02:20

Back in 80s, air traffic controllers strike opened our eyes. Went and protested and found out later mayor had police in full riot gear ready to take the port by force. Give a lot of

credit to city officials who recognized that there may be trouble with union and non union working side by side. Lines drawn at the port that demarcated working environments of union and non union and so far they have not been crossed. Non union has the opportunity to work. recognized hat times were changing during the air traffic controllers strike. Realized we had to change our game plan. Made friends with the port and embraced partnership for progress idea.

1:06:00

Got elected into office and there were still some people who were apprehensive about the appointment. People appreciated that they could call and state their problem. Companies also appreciated the accessibility. In order to incorporate change after all these years they needed to trust the person bringing in the change. Was able to do business with non union companies because we changed the work rules. Was trusted.

1:14:12

Jump from local to district. Secretary treasurer at district passed away. Was local president then. Was asked to come and take job with the district office. Refused then. At the local level wanted to make some changes. Soon, another district rep talked to me. Was asked to take the job. Worked at both posts for six months. District rep - Collectively responsible for overseeing and managing all the local unions from North Carolina to Texas. Like baby sitting for adults. Take part and contract negotiations, dispute resolutions. For most part, dispute resolution. Between union and mgmt or internal issue. Thinking for the most part is really antiquated at the ILA. Resting on laurels will make us obsolete. Must change with the times. Bold move was when we decided to partner with the employers. Must continue that trend and start thinking out of the box. One of the things, till 8-10 yrs ago, was never had a battle internally. Never a group of guys who wanted to overthrow the company govt. Now there is. The younger generation demands to know what has been done lately and holds everyone accountable. Future leaders will have to be very involved on the ground level. See and be seen.

1:25:02

2 districts. South Atlantic and Gulf, which is North Carolina to Texas. ACD or Atlantic Coastal District which is from Canada to the Great Lakes, North East, and Puerto Rico. ILWU. Completely separate union. Do not deal with them at all. Some business gets forwarded from west coast.

1:27:05

Gulf Coast is the model. Employers recognize that the labor-mgmt partnership was really important. Places like New York and Philadelphia look to us for guidance. New terminals all being built from Virginia and Down. Not only because they are right to work states. Building terminals in the state because South recognizes that money needs to be made. Containers are all negotiated nationally. South of the Mason-Dixon line all right to work states. Container carriers have contract with people in the North East. It is all one contract. If you want to work in New York, must sign a contract which says must work the same in New York, Savannah or anywhere else in the country. Break Bulk is

completely different All negotiated on a local basis. Based solely on what competition will bear. In Brownsville, TX labor working for \$10-13 an hour. Competing with Tampico and other places. Places up the coast things get better. Non union in every port in the gulf. With the exception of GulfPort which is all Union. Adopted work rules of non union and pay and benefits of union. have all the business. Perfect business model is to get competitive. Do not cut wages and benefits. Maybe not get all the work that we are used to but will pick it up in volume.

1:35:50

It is a tough start to make a career on the waterfront. Back then everyone made the same wages regardless of age. Changed in the early 90s with contract changes. With containerization in place, did not make sense to pay the same wages. in this economy, while starting out, people have to have some unique financial circumstance like working spouse or living at home. There has to be some subsidy. Work is not constant. Never make a career out of working one or two days a week. Can't do that now. Have had to get competitive with non union and cut wages and benefits.

Because it is tough to get work. There has to be someone who keeps you motivated. Great to go out in the docks and see people working down there. It is a good feeling. they are making a great living.

1:45:20

when unions merged, we slotted all guys. 4 locals merged into one. two locals had no business at all. Was a challenge to merge all four together. Watch your button. Number was called Button. Every year they reclassify and it is exciting to find out what your button number is. It is just a number seniority system. The most senior member is number 1 and the next is number 2 and so on. There are 800-900 seniority numbers in the local. Move up when someone dies or retires. Always want to know where you are. Most senior members making \$100,000 - 200,000. It becomes a very comfortable living.